

CITY INVESTS IN EARLY EDUCATION

Pre-K

Rochester expands pre-K to younger students

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When you're young enough never to have lived through a Summer Olympics or a presidential election, there's a lot to learn.

In the 3-year-old prekindergarten at Audubon School 33 on Webster Avenue — one of six schools in the city that began accepting 3-year-olds this month — that meant, among other things, opening the plastic wrapper containing a spork and napkin at breakfast time.

“Pinch with one hand, pull with the other,” teacher Rebecca Cincebox crooned. Some of the children got it right away; others whacked their packets on the table until the contents came loose; others by-

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Kristen Hayes waits to have lunch Friday in her prekindergarten class at School 33.

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Teacher Rebecca Cincebox eats lunch with her prekindergarten class Friday at Audubon School 33.

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passed the whole operation and sucked their yogurt through a straw.

The hope is that the sooner they master condiments, the better they'll eventually do in non-fiction writing, algebra and physics. It's with longterm benefits in mind that the Rochester School District has expanded its prekindergarten program — widely viewed as a national exemplar, and a crucial part of the push for early literacy — to even younger students.

A \$12 million state grant allowed the district to offer seats to 650 3-year-olds starting this month; the capacity will expand to 1,000 in September. The full-day classes are offered at six schools and a number of community providers.

“People realize that the earlier kids have some school experience, the better they'll do overall,” said Rose Marie Urzetta, administrator of School 33's Florence S. Brown Pre-K Center. “Our kindergarten teachers can tell on the first day which kids had prekindergarten. ... Some of these children, if they came right from home to kindergarten, they'd be a year or two behind.” In the last several years, the district, the city of Rochester and a coalition of community agencies have placed increased emphasis on early education as a way to stave off later problems. Numerous studies have shown that students who fall behind early seldom catch all the way back up to their more advanced peers. For one thing, students who cannot read by third grade are bound to struggle picking up subject matter in social studies, math or science. But there can be even greater problems in more subtle developmental areas, like speech articulation, emotional capacity and other aspects of brain development.

Having 3-year-olds in prekindergarten, for instance, allows the district to identify learning deficiencies or other disabilities early.

“We're avoiding the struggle and setting them up for success,” said Kathy Epeira, a speech pathologist with 30 years' experience working with young children. “Otherwise, they're sitting at home and the parents don't realize there's a problem, then (they're behind) in kindergarten.”

Most of what the 3-year-olds do in school doesn't look like school at all. There's dancing, singing, story time, snacks and nap breaks.

The main goal is to build self-control, problem-solving and speech, and Epeira and her colleagues have a number of tricks to draw those skills out. They'll place toys just out of reach, for example, so the children are forced to find the words to ask for them.

"I say to people, 'Yes, they're playing, but there's a reason it looks like this,'" Urzetta said.

The district has also expanded its traditional prekindergarten; there are now enough spots for all 4-year-olds in the city, and participation is at about 95 percent, according to the 2015 Roc the Future report card. The ultimate goal is to offer universal full-day prekindergarten to all 3-year-olds.

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Rebecca Cincebox, a prekindergarten teacher at Audubon School 33, gets kids ready to eat lunch Friday in the classroom.

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